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The Derivation of the  
Melville and Bathurst Islands  
Burial Posts

*by*

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# The Derivation of the Melville and Bathurst Islands Burial Posts

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It is the custom of the natives of Melville and Bathurst Islands to erect carved and painted posts on the graves of their dead during burial ceremonies. These posts are of peculiar and distinctive forms, for which no parallel can be found in Australia and for which no Australian origin can be suggested. The grave posts were first noted, in 1824, by Captain Bremer (3), the officer in command of the expedition which established the first settlement in Northern Australia: Fort Dundas on Melville Island. They have been described by Dr. Basedow (1) who visited Bathurst Island in 1911, and in greater detail by Sir Baldwin Spencer (9, 1914), who witnessed mourning ceremonies and the making and erection of grave posts, in 1911 and 1912. Both Basedow and Spencer believed that the un-Australian features of the Melville and Bathurst Islands culture were probably due to influences from the islands to the north of Australia.

McCarthy (5, 1940), in his detailed study of the material culture of the Australian aborigines has listed a number of items from the Arnhem Land area for which parallels may be found in New Guinea. He considers that the grave posts may be compared to posts of the *festhaus* of the Marind-anim of Dutch New Guinea as described by Vertenten (10). However, apart from the fact that in both cases the posts are carved and painted, they are not sufficiently alike to indicate with any certainty that they are related.

The object of this paper is to show that the shapes of the Melville and Bathurst Islands grave posts were in fact derived from the carved and painted posts of the *dubu* of the Central District of Papua.

The grave posts were made in a great variety of forms. These were listed and illustrated by Spencer (9, 1928), who showed however that, apart from a few simple, un-carved posts, all the varieties were made up from three basic carved features only, which were combined and varied in a number of ways.

These were: (i) A groove carved around the post, (ii) A rectangular hole cut right through the post, and (iii) A pair of straight prongs rising vertically from the top of the post (Fig. 1).

Regarding (i): In some cases the posts had disc or drum-like sections which resulted from the cutting of simple grooves, either near the top of the post or lower down. In others the grooves were extended and made very much wider, so as to leave central rod-like parts. At first sight the discs and rod-like parts seem to constitute separate features of the designs. However, they are both the result of simple grooving, which is clearly the fundamental feature.



Regarding (ii): The holes through the posts were in all cases rectangular and mortise-like in shape, and were cut horizontally right through the posts. In most cases the vertical sides were left flat, but in some they were considerably reduced in size, so that they were more or less circular in cross section. In a few posts, though this form is rare, one of the sides bordering the hole had been cut away leaving an open "mouth" on one side of the post.

Regarding (iii): The prong-like projections in all cases were on opposite sides of the top of the post, and tapered somewhat towards their upper ends. The surface at the tops of the posts between them was always flat and horizontal.

Every grave had one or two posts with rectangular holes, and at least one with prongs. The hole and the prongs were never found together on the same post, and are clearly separate types. The rod-like elements were used either by themselves, or combined with the hole, or the prongs. Neither Basedow nor Spencer could find that the holes or the prongs represented anything in particular. In the natives' mind the shapes of the posts seemed to have lost any meaning or significance that once they may have had, and to have become merely conventionalized. The posts do not seem to have been regarded as sacred in the way that most ceremonial and ritual objects are regarded by Australia aborigines. When the mourning ceremonies were completed no further notice was taken of the posts and no attempt was made to maintain them. Any male was allowed to assist in making and decorating them, even small boys; women did not take a practical part in the making, but were not forbidden to be present and did, in fact, play a prominent part in the mourning ceremonies.

Burial posts are still made and used by the natives of to-day. They have recently been recorded and photographed by Mountford (6). The shapes of the posts and their decorative painting are essentially the same as when they were observed and recorded by Basedow and by Spencer, nearly fifty years ago. Only a few minor variations have been introduced.

The *dubus* of the coastal tribes of the Central Division of Papua were large rectangular wooden platforms, usually erected in a central position in the village, and used as a meeting place and as a focus for much of the ceremonial life of the community (Plate 1). They have been described and illustrated by Seligmann (8). They were from 10 to 15 feet long, and were raised from 3 to 10 feet above the ground upon four large carved and painted corner posts. These posts were of three types: (i) With a rectangular hole near the top, (ii) With two prong-like projections at the top, and (iii) With a fork at the top, made by utilizing the natural fork of a tree (Fig. 1). The ends of the horizontal beams of the platform were supported either by passing through the rectangular hole, or by resting between the prongs, or in the fork. In any one *dubu* either one, two or all three types of post were used.

According to Seligmann, they were made by, and were the property of, individual clans. Specified persons within the clan were responsible for providing and maintaining each post, beam and plank. The posts were decorated with carved patterns and figures, either in low relief or incised, the latter being often, if not always, coloured. Annular grooves occurred on many of them as part of the carved decoration.



Thus *dubu* posts and grave posts had many points in common. Both were carved and painted, and all three of the fundamental features of the grave posts were found in the *dubu* posts. Perhaps the annular grooves are not very significant, as this simple decoration might occur anywhere, but the association of the two distinctive features: the rectangular holes and the prong-like projections, both in the *dubu* and in the grave posts, indicates with a very high degree of certainty that they were related and that the one was derived from the other. That the derivation was from the *dubu* to the grave posts, and not *vice versa* is shown, if for no other reason, by the fact that in the *dubu* these features were an essential part of its method of construction, whereas in the grave posts they have no useful function.

Other points of similarity between the grave and the *dubu* posts serve to confirm their relationship. Many of the *dubu* posts had, at the top, a carved device or emblem, like a finial. Some were crescent shaped, and others were knobs or bosses of various forms. Seligmann considered that these were almost certainly clan badges. A few of the grave posts observed by Basedow and by Spencer had, in addition to their usual features, crudely carved elements on top, which may have been representations of *dubu* post finials.

The fundamental and characteristic carved motif used in the decoration of nearly all of the *dubu* posts was a pattern consisting of rows of small four-sided pyramids standing out from the general surface of the post, called *kala* (Fig. 2). This pattern is formed simply by cutting two series of regularly spaced parallel grooves, at right angles to each other. As pointed out by Seligmann, it is the easiest imaginable pattern to produce with the natives' universal tool, the adze. The *kala* motif was used mainly to fill in areas of the decorative design and to cover whole surfaces, but it occurred also in strips, bands, and in single rows.

Seligmann stated that this pattern was explained as signifying the squamae of the skin of the crocodile, but the pattern is so fundamentally simple that this explanation may well have arisen merely from its chance resemblance to crocodile skin.

The *kala* pattern does not occur on the grave posts, but a pattern which is essentially the same, although it is painted and not carved, was used on many of them. This is a sort of hatching made up of two series of closely-set parallel lines superimposed upon each other, at right angles, exactly the same as the grooves of the *kala* pattern. The use of this pattern is not confined to the grave posts, nor to Melville and Bathurst Islands. It is widely used throughout Arnhem Land in decorative painting on weapons, utensils, sacred and ceremonial objects, and on bark drawings. It is in fact highly characteristic of the art of the area. Like the *kala* pattern, it is used to cover surfaces and to fill in areas in decorative designs. In the *kala* pattern the lines run vertically and horizontally; in the Arnhem Land pattern the lines usually, but not always, run diagonally. If the two patterns are related, just such a difference would be expected. Working with an adze, the implement is held in both hands directly in front of the user (Fig. 2), so that it is somewhat difficult to cut a diagonal line. In painting with a brush held in one hand, the swing of the wrist and forearm results naturally in a diagonal brush stroke, and it is more difficult to make a horizontal or a vertical line. McCarthy (5) has pointed out that this painted pattern does occur in New Guinea. It could perhaps have been introduced into Arnhem Land independently, as a painted pattern; but as the *kala* was so highly characteristic of the *dubu* posts, from which the grave posts were derived, it may well have been introduced at the same time.



Just how the *dubu* post designs reached Melville and Bathurst Islands cannot of course be specified, although it is known that there was contact, by sea, between Arnhem Land and Papua.

It has been shown by Berndt (2) that the natives of north-eastern Arnhem Land had knowledge of the Torres Strait islands and the southern coast of New Guinea. This came about through their contact with the Macassan traders, and some of them actually visited these places as members of the crew of Macassan ships; these facts are recorded in their great historical and mythical song cycles. Berndt has also shown that there is reason to believe, from some of the stories embodied in the songs, that people from New Guinea or the Torres Strait islands actually arrived on the shores of north-eastern Arnhem Land, either being driven there by storms or having sailed there deliberately. It is not known that the Melville and Bathurst islanders had similar contacts with New Guinea, but this may well have been so.

The *dubu* post designs may thus have been brought either by Arnhemlanders returning from New Guinea, or by New Guinea people arriving in their own canoes. In this regard it is perhaps significant that the coastal people of the *dubu* area, the Koita and Motu, were famous for the long sea voyages made by their *lakatois*. It is not known that they sailed as far as Arnhem Land, but such a voyage would not have been at all impossible for one of these craft.

The *dubu* was, according to Seligmann, closely associated with the spirits of the dead. The skulls of the dead were sometimes hung upon them and the spirits were supposed to resort to them at feast times and to partake of the shadow of the food hung there for consumption by the living. Berndt has shown that the Arnhemlanders for some reason regarded the coast of Papua and the Torres Strait islands as the land of the dead—the place to which their spirits went after death. Thus the *dubu* posts may have come to be used as grave posts either because the *dubu* itself was associated with the dead or because of its origin in the land of the dead.

The *dubu* very probably belongs to the Megalithic culture, which spread out from south east Asia, in comparatively late (Neolithic) times, through Indonesia, New Guinea and the islands of the Pacific.

The Megalithic builders in India, Indonesia and Melanesia made wooden structures as well as stone ones, and the *dubu* is planned on a massive and sturdy scale well in keeping with the Megalithic manner. Riesenfeld (7) who has made a particular study of this culture in Melanesia, does not believe that the *dubu* belongs to it, because of the relatively small area in which it occurs compared to the widespread distribution of the culture as a whole throughout Melanesia. He has not, however, apparently noted that the forked post was a characteristic feature of the *dubu*, although he himself has shown that the forked post was typically Megalithic and had particular significance and importance. In New Ireland, for instance, the entrance to the courtyards of the men's houses was via a forked tree trunk, known as the "eye of the demon", which was believed to prevent the entry of evil spirits. The design of the *dubu* was in general so uniform that it is clear that its various constituent parts must have conformed strictly to convention and tradition. The use of forked posts could not therefore have been merely fortuitous. It is highly probable that they correspond to the



Megalithic forked post as found elsewhere. In Assam, for instance, Hutton (4) claims that forked wooden posts are there related to forked stone pillars, such as those erected at Dimapur, at the foot of the Naga Hills, and that this represents a survival of the Indonesian Megalithic culture. These posts, both the forked and the "chessman" type, in stone or wood, are associated with a cult of the dead.

The wave of Megalithic culture did not reach Australia, but it seems that at least a faint ripple from its extreme edge did actually reach Melville and Bathurst Islands.

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#### ILLUSTRATIONS.

Plate 1.—Papuan *Dubu*, location unknown from photograph in the National Museum of Victoria.

Fig. 1.—Typical *Dubu* posts and Grave Posts. 1-3 after Spencer (1914), 4-8 after Seligmann (1927-1930).

Fig. 2.—Carving *Kala* pattern on *Dubu* post. After Seligmann (1927).

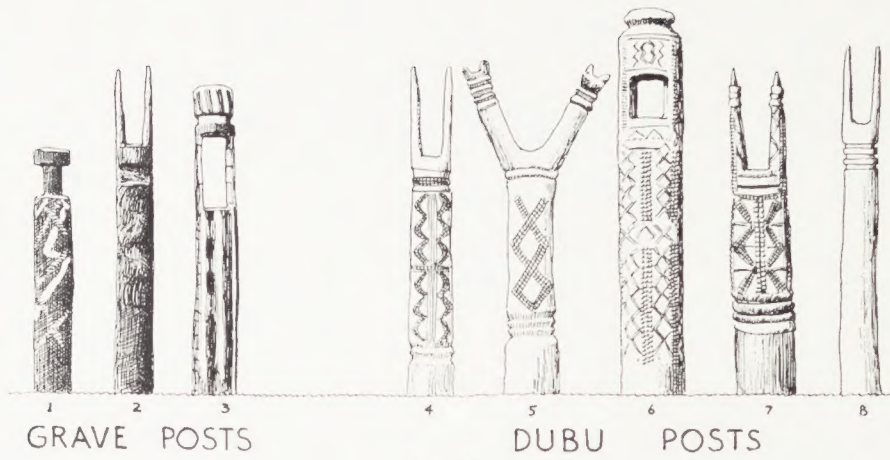


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

Carving Kala pattern on Dubu Post,





Plate I.  
Papuan Dubu.











